

Darkness Shared

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A galaxy far, far away, six months before the Battle of Ruusan...

The *Golden Song* rode the shifting currents of color and light through hyperspace, covering vast distances with each click of its onboard chronometer. Crian Maru sat rigid in her chair, using every meditative exercise she knew to remain calm and in control. She wasn't sure how the Jedi Masters did it. They always looked so serene, so at peace. Perhaps she would eventually achieve such a constant state of quiet reflection and confidence, the conditions that she believed separated a Jedi Knight from a Jedi Master. But those were thoughts for another day. Now she had to prepare herself and her apprentice for the tests that lay ahead of them, while she tried to come to grips with the horror they had left behind.

Under the light of Harpori's sun, Crian Maru and her apprentice had landed the *Golden Song*. What was supposed to be a bustling Duros colony was silent and still. No one had come to greet them. The town square had been deserted. When Crian reached into the Force, all she sensed was sadness. All she felt was emptiness. Behind this emptiness lurked darkness.

The transport shuddered, and with a sudden shift in the stars, the journey through hyperspace came to an end. Crian tried to block out the images of Harpori. Slaughtered Duros adorned with the unmistakable wounds of a lightsaber. Men, women, and children massacred to appease the dark hunger and churning anger of the Marauder. The Madman. The Dark Killer.

With a deep, calming breath, the Jedi Knight banished the haunting images, at least for the moment. It was time to finish the job they had set out to do. They had to face the darkness. He was close, their quarry. Within this star system. Crian could feel his sinister presence in the Force. It was not a feeling she appreciated.

"Where are we, Dree?" Crian asked her Padawan learner. The young Rodian, Dree Vandap -- barely more than a child -- was reviewing the *Golden Song*'s nav computer display, anticipating her teacher's request. "Still in the Mid Rim," Dree said, "A system called Balowa." Dree frowned in the Rodian fashion, crinkling her snout. She absently shook her head crest. "I see nothing out here."

"He's here," Crian said, adjusting the controls and engaging the ship's sublight thrusters. "Check the sensors, and be mindful for vibrations in the Force. It will tell you more than machines and computers ever will, if you listen to its song."

For Crian, the Force was like a constant melody that had been with her for as long as she could remember. It washed over the Jedi Knight like waves of sensation that few others could feel, an omnipresent hum that was at once grand and complex, simple and comforting, full of movement yet totally still. When she was at peace, she could feel the Force resonate within her. Like the echoes of a beloved song. That was how Crian perceived it. Other Jedi explained it differently. Her Master had described it as an omnipresent mist that swirled and drifted constantly around him. Dree described it as a still pond; when it rippled, it told her things.

Crian closed her eyes, letting the Force guide her hands as they moved over the transport's controls. The song reverberated within her, changing, building. Now it was thunderous and cacophonous. Crian could sense the Dark One in the Force, could hear the terrible rhythm that made him tangible to her Jedi senses. His presence was full of anger. It vibrated with barely controlled rage.

He was coming.

The Marauder.

The Madman.

Kaox Krul.

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The Marauder slipped his ship into the transport's wake, riding the thrust of its sublight drive like some sleek ocean predator angling for the kill. He was Kaox Krul, proud warrior of the Brotherhood of Darkness, devoted follower of Kaan, the Dark Lord of the Sith. A great war was about to erupt, pitting the hate-fueled believers in the dark side of the Force against the weak-willed Jedi who preached the hypocrisy of peace and tranquillity. The Jedi claimed they never felt the raw wind of rage as it screamed through their blood. *Liars!* They denied the dark side, refused to harness its power. They made rules to stop others from accepting that strength if they so desired. How Kaox hated the Jedi and the sanctimony they preached.

This one, the human woman, had been hounding Kaox for more than a month. It was time to end their little game. He had to return to Lord Kaan's side. He could sense his Master's summons in the Force, and he could not resist the beckoning much longer. Lord Kaan was calling them all, the entire Brotherhood. The war of dark against light was about to begin. But Kaox had one more thing to accomplish before he returned to his Master.

The hunting transport moved in a deliberate search pattern, sliding closer and closer to a small, uninhabited world. Kaox didn't bother to check his nav computer; the Force told him that the unnamed planet teemed with life, none of it more advanced than a womp rat. There was nothing in this system to concern him. The Jedi were alone, without any possibility of assistance. *Soon*, Kaox thought, *they would be dead*.

The Marauder pushed his starfighter into an attack vector and powered up his weapons system. The transport was in his sights -- a slow, lumbering creature about to be ripped asunder by the fast predator swooping up behind it. He would have preferred to kill the Jedi and her apprentice in close combat, lightsaber against lightsaber, but the time for such contests had passed. He reached into the Force, pictured the transport exploding into a thousand fiery shards. He let his anger rise within him, filling him with rage and power. Now the Force was a crimson sheen before his eyes, bathing the transport in a targeting haze that would increase his accuracy and ensure the killing shot. Kaox triggered the starfighter's laser cannons, and bolts of energized death streaked toward the unsuspecting prey.

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The Dark Killer had slipped behind them like a shadow. She felt his savage presence a fraction of a second before Dree cried out. Crian suppressed a smile. Her Padawan was very good, but now was not the time to tell her so. Instead her hands danced over the controls, coaxing the sluggish transport to veer from its current course before the Marauder's lasers burned through their hull or sliced open their sublight engines.

"Dree, hang on to something!" Crian commanded as the *Golden Song* shook and groaned. With stern resistance -- and a token measure of defiance -- the transport rolled slowly to one side. Crian grimaced and hoped it would hold together.

"The Marauder is right behind us!" Dree shouted. "Closing fast ..."

The explosion that ripped through the transport drowned out Dree's voice. She might have finished her sentence, but Crian couldn't hear the words over the noise of the laser strike and the blaring alarms that warned her of a dozen imminent systems failures. The *Golden Song* was locked in a spin. As smoke poured into the cockpit, Crian frowned and fought the controls. Then, with a crash and a powerful jolt, the lights snapped out, leaving the Jedi Knight and her Padawan in total darkness.

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Kaox Krul felt his starfighter shudder as lances of laser fire erupted from its forward-mounted cannons. He used the dark side to aim true, pinpointing the precise spot where the lasers would rip through the transport's engines. His elation was momentary at best, however, because the transport had dodged the fatal fire. The insipid Jedi had sensed his presence! There could be no other answer. His prey slid to the right, a maneuver far too ambitious and daring for such a lumbering craft. The Marauder's lasers sliced into the belly of the transport, carving a wound that bled atmosphere from the left ventral portion of its hull. Kaox leered. It wasn't the killing blow he had foreseen, but it was damaging nonetheless.

As the transport fell into an uncontrolled spin, Kaox realized with some alarm that his starfighter was too close. He had wanted to fly through the explosion, scattering the remaining shards of the transport in his passing as he sent the Jedi and her apprentice to their Final Jump. But there was no explosion, and the spinning transport's nose struck the starfighter a solid blow. The Jedi's ship hit the Marauder like a charging nerf plowing into a ripclaw.

Kaox's consciousness fled as the starfighter bounced away and fell toward the small planet below.

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The transport tumbled end over end.

While Crian hoped that fate had spelled the end of the Marauder, she didn't believe that Kaox Krul could be dispatched so easily. The darkness was still out there. Regardless, she had more immediate problems. The *Golden Song* spiraled toward the small planet that had greeted the Jedi shortly after they had emerged from hyperspace. Now it filled the viewport as Crian struggled to regain control of the vessel.

"Dree, what can you tell me about that planet?"

There was no response. Crian could sense nothing more than an impression of the Rodian Padawan. Dree was alive and probably unconscious. Anything else Crian imagined was purely speculation, and she didn't have time for that. The planet was coming up fast, and she still couldn't get the transport to respond to her commands.

"Come on," Crian urged the ship. "Your namesake is supposed to bring good luck and fortune. I could use a little of both right about now."

The *Golden Song* hit the planet's atmosphere hard. Crian could feel the ship breaking apart around her. "A little help here," Crian whispered, willing the stabilizers to come back online or the repulsorlift engine to kick in. She hit the repulsor toggle again. Nothing. Once more.

There was a recalcitrant groan from somewhere deep in the transport. Suddenly, it was slowing, trying to level out. The repulsors were working! That was something, anyway. She might not be able to get the *Golden Song* up into space again, but maybe she could lead it relatively gently to the surface of the planet.

It wasn't going to be a pretty landing, Crian knew. The transport rocked back and forth as the repulsors pushed against the planet's surface. With great trepidation, the ship fought the clutches of gravity as it punched through the exosphere into the ionosphere, sliced across the stratosphere, and plunged into the sky. A weird realization came to Crian as she imagined the ship confronting its own destiny with a mixture of trepidation and valor, and it made her sad. The *Golden Song* had made its last journey. Their beautiful, faithful transport was diving to its death.

The transport raked the treetops, cutting a swath through the leafy canopy before plunging into the sea of dense foliage. It hit the ground, bounced off its repulsorfield, and bounced again. Through the cracked viewport, Crian saw impenetrable forest. The transport slid across a clearing and plowed into the base of a massive tree trunk, and then Crian saw nothing at all.

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Kaox's senses cleared as his starfighter skimmed across the planet's atmosphere. He struggled to attain a vector that would allow the ship to glide toward the planet's surface in a more or less controlled fall. He caught sight of the Jedi's transport as it plunged toward the dense forest canopy, then focused his attention on saving his own craft. The starfighter's nose had been crushed, rendering its sensor array useless. Kaox was certain that other systems had been damaged as well, perhaps beyond repair, but he had engines and steering. He flew the starfighter toward the surface, looking for a place to set down.

Then he would head out on foot, locate the Jedi, and either dance on their dead bodies or finish the job -- up close, where he could carve them into small chunks.

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Dree Vandap knew she was alive because she hurt all over. A spirit on the Rodian Hunting World -- the place good Rodians go when they die -- couldn't hurt like this. At least, Dree had never heard of such a thing in any of the stories she had read. She hadn't been raised in the Rodian tradition, though, so there were probably a lot of things about Rodian theology that she didn't know. She grew up in the Jedi Temple, where she learned the ways of the Jedi from teachers such as Lord Hoth and Crian Maru. The Jedi didn't follow the Path of the Hunt, but Dree had read about her homeworld and the Rodian traditions. She felt that she had a good idea about the Hunting World and spirit hunters, and certainly no spirit that she had ever read about had a bruise the size of a shell-fruit on the side of its head.

The Padawan pushed aside the debris and stood up. The *Golden Song* was a ruin of shredded durasteel, melted plasteel, and exposed wiring. She loved this ship, but it was painfully obvious that it had flown its last mission. Thankfully, it hadn't been Dree's last mission as well.

"Just wait, Vandap," Dree muttered to herself, "the day isn't over yet."

The Rodian took a moment to assess the damage. It looked bad from the inside, but she didn't see anything that led her to believe she was in immediate danger. There was no fire, no sparking wires, no warning hum signalling a power cell overload. She stepped into a relatively clear spot on the tilted deck and checked that her lightsaber was still clipped to her belt. Then she remembered her Master.

"Master Crian?" Dree called out. Her voice was weaker and more frightened sounding than she had intended, so she called again, louder and -- she hoped -- with more confidence.

When she received no reply, Dree reached out with the Force. She probed the area, searching for any sign of her Master's presence in the Force. Dree wasn't very good at this sort of thing, though every Jedi had some rudimentary ability to sense vibrations in the Force. She concentrated, closed her eyes, and tried to open herself to the vibrations.

Nothing.

No, wait. There was something. Dree had a sense of impending doom. Death. The dark side. It made her convulse.

"Space this!" Dree muttered. She shook her head, clearing away the feeling. "I'll check on Crian the old-fashioned way."

She moved toward the forward part of the cabin, trying to ignore the shattered viewport and the crushed control panels. "Crian?" she called again, and she could feel the fear trying to well within her. Dree didn't let it.

Stepping over a piece of deck plating that had been ripped open, Dree saw Crian's boot sticking out from behind a twisted console. The Padawan took a deep breath to steady herself, then moved to her Master's side. She saw Crian lying there, and was unsure how to proceed. She didn't see any gaping wounds or obviously broken bones. There wasn't any blood pooling around her Master, but that didn't mean she wasn't hurt just the same. *Should I touch her*, Dree wondered, trying to remember the rudimentary medical training she had received a few years earlier. *Shake her? Call out her name until she answers?*

But what if she's dead, Dree asked herself. *She certainly won't respond if she's already dead.*

"I'm not dead," Crian said in a hoarse whisper, blinking her eyes open to look at her student.

Dree couldn't help herself. She jumped back, banging her elbow on a twisted bulkhead.

"Fine," Crian said in an amused tone, "Don't help your old Master."

"You're not old," Dree said, coming to Crian's side and helping her sit up. "But you certainly scared a few years off my life."

Crian sat still for a moment. She closed her eyes, and Dree knew that she was reaching out with the Force. When Crian opened her eyes, Dree could see determination and purpose within them. The Jedi rose to her feet, placing a hand on the lightsaber dangling at her side.

"We aren't finished yet," Crian said. "The Marauder is still out there, and he's searching for us."

"I guess that makes us the prey."

"For the moment, Little Hunter," Crian said affectionately. "Let's let him think of us that way for a while longer."

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Kaox Krul skulked through the forest like a stealthful prowler. His senses stretched before him, making him aware of every insect, plant and flower, every small creature that cowered in its burrow or fled as he approached. This world, its bountiful lower life-forms, had never seen the likes of the Marauder, and he fed upon the fear that his presence garnered. He was still too far away to get an accurate feeling, but Kaox imagined that the Jedi and her apprentice were experiencing the same kind of fear as the fur-covered burrowers and the small leaf-eaters. That fear would grow as he got closer, and he would draw strength from their dread.

He would relish it.

The Marauder kept a steady pace. He didn't worry that he would misstep or stumble. Such were the concerns of lesser beings. Stealth fell away like a tattered cloak, a serpent's skin. He envisioned his prey shuddering under thick blankets of fear.

He wore black body armor of his own design. It consisted of protective padding and composite plates crafted into an intricate pattern that glorified the Sith and the Brotherhood of Darkness. He had also used Sith alchemy to imbue the armor with dark side energy, creating a barrier that provided some protection against the abilities of the Jedi. He was proud of the work he had done, both the menial construction and the application of Sith magic, and he wore the armor as a symbol of his faith in the dark side of the Force.

At his side, clipped to his belt, hung the lightsaber that he had used to kill more than a hundred foes. Kaox hadn't constructed the weapon. He had earned the lightsaber, taking it from the still-grasping hand of the first Jedi he had killed in personal combat. He diminished the Jedi every time he used the weapon to strike down an innocent -- such as the pleading Duros he slaughtered at the Harpori colony -- or a despised foe like the likes of that Jedi, Karist Dem, or the Wookiee diplomat Rojarra. The weapon, cleansed in blood and used as an instrument of the dark side, was completely Kaox's now. Barely any of the Jedi taint remained.

Kaox would use this weapon to kill the Jedi woman and her young apprentice. He saw the battle to come in his mind. He would start by testing the two of them together, allowing them to team up against him to reveal the cowardice that typified the Jedi. Then he would break away, give them time to wallow in their fear as they contemplated his greater strength and power. When he struck again, he would kill the apprentice. It wouldn't be a clean, swift kill. He wanted her to experience agony, to intensify her fear. She would call to her Master for help, but she would also realize that help would not reach her in time. When she knew that death had set upon her to feast, he would end her life. His actions would drive the Jedi crazy with grief and anger. Perhaps she would accept the truth of the dark side then, but he had not found that to be the case in the past. The Jedi were stubborn, closed-minded. She would come close to the truth of the Force, but she would back away from the power that might actually give her a fighting chance. And then the Jedi would die as well.

When it was over and his lightsaber's blade was powered down, Kaox Krul would return to Lord Kaan, triumphant and ready to carry on the next phase of the Brotherhood's rise to glory. The Jedi and her apprentice were simply appetizers before the bountiful feast of darkness to come.

The Marauder was hungry. He increased his pace, letting the dark side flow through him and increase his endurance. He replayed the scene he had imagined as he ran. The Marauder was very hungry.

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"We have to go," Crian Maru said, leaping down from the crumpled transport. "We have to go now."

Dree Vandap, a survival kit slung over her left shoulder, landed in the moist grass beside her Master. "Shouldn't we just go and face him? Get this over with?"

"The Marauder is powerful, Dree. Don't underestimate him. He knows that we've been following him since Harpori, and we've both felt his hatred -- his darkness -- through the Force. Something tells me that this isn't the place to confront him."

The Jedi and her apprentice ran to the back of the transport and examined the cargo bay door.

"The servomotors won't open that door. It's too badly mangled," Dree said.

"Then I'll have to improvise," Crian replied, drawing her lightsaber and igniting it with a practiced motion. Gripping the lightsaber with both hands, Crian sketched a rough circle in the durasteel door. The metal glowed white hot as the lightsaber sliced through it, then the portion Crian had cut away fell inward, granting access to the cargo compartment.

Crian jumped easily through the opening. "Keep watch," she called back. "We won't be alone for much longer."

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The Marauder watched the apprentice from his perch among the trees. He sensed that her Master was nearby, but Kaox couldn't see her. Was she still inside the wrecked transport? Or was she somewhere in the forest, waiting to strike at him while he went after the Rodian? Would the Jedi use her apprentice in that manner, as bait? He didn't think so, but sometimes the followers of the light surprised and confused him. He let the dark side swell inside him, using it to mask his own presence while simultaneously enhancing his senses to stay alert.



He glanced to each side, even though the Force revealed that he was alone in the trees. Then he unhooked his lightsaber from his belt and held it at the ready. He didn't like that he had lost sight of the Jedi. It made him uneasy. Had she anticipated his arrival? Was she more powerful than he had dared imagine? No matter. The dark side was his ally. Kaox would strike fast and strike hard. He would take no chances.

The apprentice would die. Now. Without warning. It wouldn't be as satisfying as the game he had imagined, so he would just have to amuse himself later, against the Jedi.

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Dree felt her heart beat fiercely in her chest. She was scared, and she couldn't help it. Her own ability to see into the Force, to feel its vibrations and read the patterns in the flow, was woefully inadequate compared to Crian Maru's. Even so, her intuition told her that there was a storm coming. A literal open-the-sky-and-let-loose-the-flood storm, full of lightning and wind and thunder. It would crawl across the sky like a great beast. She knew that before the first drop of rain hit the ground, the Marauder would be upon them. Her teacher sensed this, had warned her to be ready, and Dree tried to find her calm, her peace.

The Rodian slid her lightsaber from beneath her robes. It wasn't her lightsaber, not really. Someday, hopefully in the not-to-distant future, she would set out to build her own. She wasn't ready to take on that test, however. Not yet. Until then, she would use this one -- a gift from her mentor. Crian had given it to her the day she had accepted the young Rodian as her Padawan learner.

"Learn to use this well," she remembered Crian instructing her. Since that day, she had practiced with the weapon during every

spare moment. She wanted to show Crian that she was serious about her studies, about her commitment. Dree wanted to prove that she had what it took to be a Jedi Knight.

Dree caught movement out of the corner of her eye. It was as though a shadow had disengaged itself from the forest and was moving toward her at lightspeed. She turned toward the dark blur, reacting with Jedi reflexes but still feeling like she was standing still. There was a loud hum as the shadow's lightsaber flared to life. Dree brought her own lightsaber up in a defensive position while extending its energy blade to its full length. She didn't think. She didn't run. Dree stood her ground and held her lightsaber before her.

The blur took shape. It was a large human with hair cropped so close to his scalp that he was practically bald. His powerful form was covered in black padded armor that stung her eyes when she looked at it. The symbols etched into the armor resonated with the dark side. She had only seen him from a distance, but there was no mistaking this giant of a man.

It was the Marauder, Kaox Krul. He didn't say a word. His hatred screamed at her with words of dour silence. It clung to him like a shroud. Dree was aware that somewhere, in the distance, a dagger of lightning cut the sky. Her multifaceted eyes, however, were locked upon his lightsaber's blood-red blade. He held it high, its hilt almost too small for his huge hand. The blade cut a rainbow through the air as it arced toward her.

Dree was dead. For a moment, she was as sure of that fact as she was of her own name. But then her training took over. She caught the Marauder's energy blade on her own, sending sparks flying in all directions. Then, before he could counter her defense, Dree tumbled to the side, closer to the open cargo compartment and momentarily out of the Marauder's reach. She regained her feet in one fluid motion, drawing on the Force to lend strength to her arms and legs.

"Even Jedi whelps can surprise me," Kaox growled, taking a cautious step toward her. "But in the end, it's always the same. The Jedi whelp is dead, and I score another kill."

Dree tried to steady her voice, but she knew she was no match for the Marauder. "You have a lot of deaths to answer for," she said, keeping her lightsaber's blade in front of her.

"Perhaps, Jedi whelp, perhaps." He took another step toward her. "But I won't be answering to you."

Crian Maru exploded from the cargo compartment astride Dree's repulsorlift speeder bike, bounced across the open field, and made a sharp turn back toward the combatants. Gunning the thrusters, Crian let the bike lunge forward. She sent a command through the Force, mentally ordering her student to leap onto the bike as it passed by. Then she turned her complete attention to operating the speeder. She wasn't as good a pilot as Dree, so she had to try a bit harder.

Kaox Krul watched the speeder bike race toward him and smiled. Now he had both of the Jedi in his sights. He readied himself, preparing to strike as soon as the bike was close enough. *Perhaps this will be a challenge*, he thought.

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As soon as the Marauder turned his attention to Crian and the speeder bike, Dree began to move. She was midway through the tumble that would place her behind the dark-sider when she felt Crian's voice enter her mind.

"*On!*" the voice shouted.

Dree would obey, but she had to buy time. She finished her roll, bunched her legs beneath her, and leaped. Her jump carried her past the Marauder's exposed back. She slashed with the lightsaber, hoping to at least wound the dark-sider. Kaox Krul responded quickly and perceptively. Instead of slicing into the dark armor, Dree's blade bounced off the Marauder's ignited lightsaber.

The Marauder had to spin around to protect himself, so he wasn't able to avoid the speeder bike. It sideswiped him, knocking him prone.

Dree finished her leap, landing perfectly behind Crian on the moving vehicle.

Crian didn't slow. She turned the speeder away from the wreck of the *Golden Song* and pushed the thrusters to full. As they raced toward the forest, away from the Marauder, Dree could sense that Crian sought every advantage. She, not the Sith warrior, would choose the battleground. She would dictate how the conflict would be waged. The Rodian Padawan could sense that her Master wanted to frustrate their adversary at every turn.

Dree hoped that was enough of an edge.

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Kaox Krul rolled with the impact, rising instantly to his feet. He glanced around, saw that his lightsaber had fallen near the wrecked transport, and reached into the Force. He immediately found the invisible line that stretched between the lightsaber and his open hand.

With a gesture, he plucked that line and the lightsaber returned to him. A few seconds had passed, but when he looked up the speeder bike was already disappearing into the forest.

"No!" Kaos shouted, his rage building. "I will not be denied this kill!"

Gathering the Force around him, the Marauder ran. Like a stroke of black lightning, he dashed across the clearing and into the depths of the forest, following the speeder's path. The Force-powered burst of speed might not catch the Jedi's vehicle, but it would keep him close.

He opened himself to the dark side, impossibly increasing his speed even more.

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Dree held on to her Master as the speeder bike wove through the forest. She should be piloting the speeder. She was a better bike pilot than Crian, and navigating between these massive trees demanded keen instincts and sharp reflexes. There was no time to stop and switch places, however. The Marauder would be coming after them, and neither of them was ready for a fight. They had both been shaken up by the crash. Dree hurt in a few places, though she didn't think she had suffered anything more severe than a deep bruise. Crian might have more serious injuries.

As the speeder completed a complex series of twists and turns and settled back onto a more-or-less straight course, Dree risked a glance over her shoulder. Startled, she almost let go of her grip on her Master. The Marauder was right behind them! He must have cloaked himself in the dark side, because Crian didn't seem to have noticed his proximity. He was moving with Force-boosted speed and was almost upon them.

"He's here!" Dree shouted, her words whipped away by the roar of the speeder bike as it cleaved the wind.

Crian had sensed her student's anxiety a flickering instant before Dree spoke. She pressed the footpads that regulated the thrusters until they wouldn't move any further, and the speeder shot forward. *That had to be enough*, Dree thought. There just wasn't any more for the speeder to give.

The Marauder's face twisted with rage as he summoned even deeper reserves of dark-side energy to bring himself within a few scant meters of the bike's mortified passenger. Even with the Force, could he really keep up with them? His lightsaber flared to life and he swung at the speeder. The stroke made him lose his balance, and he tumbled feet over head and hit the ground hard.

The Marauder had struck his mark, the tip of his lightsaber blade sliced into one of the bike's power cables. The damage didn't prove immediately fatal, but the speeder would run out of power at an increased rate. Dree sensed Crian's concern and shared it. Could they reach a relatively safe location?

Dree looked back once more, but the Marauder didn't seem to be pursuing them any longer. Perhaps his resolve had finally given out, as well.

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The dark clouds that had crept over the horizon earlier now filled the sky. Night was coming, and with the cloud cover it would be almost completely dark. The storm, when it hit, promised to be spectacular. Crian reached out into the Force. The dark presence was still there, but it wasn't close. At least not for the moment.

They had abandoned the speeder bike an hour earlier as its energy gauge dipped toward empty. Ditching the vehicle at the bottom of a deep ravine, they started running and kept their fevered pace until they had put a few additional kilometers behind them. When they reached the rocky hills that distinguished this part of the forest, Crian motioned for them to halt. They found a small cave, partially hidden by undergrowth, and settled inside it to rest.

"Will the storm come soon?" Dree asked.

"No," Crian replied, hearing the Force's song. "It's waiting."

They took turns keeping watch while the other tried to sleep. At best, they were able to slip into a fitful half-slumber, troubled by dark dreams and images of the Marauder. Most of the time, one or the other simply closed her eyes and tried to find some calm within the Force.

They ate rations from their survival packs and drank water from canteens. They didn't speak much, but each of them braced for the battle to come. The storm loomed threateningly but refused to spill its contents. The clouds above were dark and painfully bloated.

Time passed.

The Marauder drew closer.

And the storm waited with sinister anticipation.

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Crian remained vigilant as Dree slept, apparently, at least for the moment, unfettered by nightmares. Crian wondered whether she would have held her ground had her Padawan learner not been with her. She had faith in Dree, but the young Rodian still had much to learn. She wasn't ready to face the Marauder, not yet. Their survival would almost certainly fall to Crian, but she held secret doubts as to whether she was ready to face Kaox Krul. He was insane, powerful, full of the dark side, hungry for the kill. Rage had made him strong, fearless. Could she do it? Could she defeat the Marauder?

Yes, Crian thought. But it would be better if she didn't have to worry about her Padawan.

"Sleep well," Crian whispered, gently touching her student's forehead.

The Jedi Knight slipped out of the cave, into the cloud-shrouded night.

Behind her, in the cave, Dree Vandap rolled over and moaned. Her nightmares had returned.

* * *

For almost two days, Kaox Krul tracked the Jedi through the forest. After trying to disable the speeder bike, he had lost his balance and fallen with a bonejarring crunch. It was a sloppy miscalculation, the result of moving too fast to stop his momentum. The wind had been knocked out of him. He swayed in and out of consciousness for several long minutes before he was able to resume the chase. By then, the speeder was gone and he didn't have the energy to attempt another burst of speed. So he started walking, maintaining a casual pace as he let his body recover from the extreme effort of running in the Force.

It took more than a day to reach the place where the speeder bike was hidden. It was half buried in a mountain of dead leaves and branches at the bottom of a scar-like trench. He almost strode past the ravine and probably would have missed it entirely had he been moving faster. These Jedi were certainly hard on their vehicles, Kaox mused.

He dropped into the ravine to examine the speeder. The Jedi weren't nearby, and Kaox hadn't expected something as mundane as a crash to hinder them. It appeared that the speeder bike had simply run out of energy.

He spent the next day following their trail into the forest. What began as a simple matter turned daunting as their trail suddenly disappeared. Kaox plumbed the dark side, urging it to illuminate the path the Jedi had taken. His prey had their own lifelines to the Force, however, and they had somehow masked their course. The Marauder could do nothing but wander the forest, looking for physical signs of their passage or wait for the Force to betray them.

Or for them to betray themselves.

Kaox hid himself from detection as the Jedi had done. *No, not both of them*, he realized. The apprentice wasn't experienced enough to have such fine control over the Force. It was the Knight who was shielding them, wasting valuable energy to mask herself and the young one. *Just another sign of weakness*, Kaox thought. Just another indication of why the dark side would eventually triumph over the light.

More time passed. Kaox Krul took a few hours to rest and meditate on the dark side.

When he was ready to move out again, he became a tireless predator, a relentless stalker. He paused, sniffed the air, and opened himself to the Force. There it was. A tingle, a subtle vibration. It wasn't much, but he had found his quarry. With a smile that was both disturbing and hateful, the Marauder moved in for the kill.

* * *

Crian Maru slid through the forest like a quiet breeze. Overhead, the clouds parted just enough to reveal a patch of clear night sky. The planet's twin moons shone through the break, painting the forest in a pale, ghostly light. Her senses tingled like live wires as the Force coursed through her, but she couldn't locate the Marauder in the Force. He was hiding, though she still had a vague sense of being watched, even if she couldn't pinpoint the source of her trepidation.

She pressed her search, eventually stepping out of the trees into a large clearing. In the moonlight, she saw that a calm, still lake filled the open space. The twin orbs above were luminously reflected in the water. Crian noticed that the clouds were tearing apart, and now she could see stars in the deep blue expanse around the moons. Perhaps the storm was dying. If so, it was a good omen.

* * *

Dree sat up in the cave, instantly awake and clear-headed. Crian was gone. She was alone in the small hollow. Crian had left her behind, had gone out to face the Marauder on her own.

Did she think so little of me, of my abilities? Dree wondered.

Part of her wanted to stay right where she was, safely hidden in this cave. She couldn't do that, though, not if she wanted to be true to herself and her Master. A Rodian hunter wouldn't cower, afraid, hidden in a cave. Certainly a Jedi Knight wouldn't. However, Dree was neither a Rodian hunter nor a Jedi Knight -- not yet. Fear, though, led to the dark side. She wouldn't take that path -- not willingly at least.

Dree steeled herself with a calming breath and set her mind for battle. Crian needed her help, and Dree wasn't going to disappoint her.

* * *

Crian Maru, Jedi Knight, sat beside the quiet lake, under the glow of the twin moons. The heavy storm clouds framed the clearing, but the sky directly overhead was crisp and clear. She was calm, at peace. The Force's song vibrated through her, filling her with confidence and power. She was ready.

The shadow stood at the edge of the clearing, partially hidden by the thick clump of trees. She had been aware of the Dark One's presence for a few moments, but she made no move, gave no indication that she had spotted him. The shadow boiled out of the darkness, and in the pale glow of the moons' light, the Marauder was revealed. He moved toward her without a sound, waiting to ignite his lightsaber until the last possible moment. Crian decided not to wait.

The Jedi Knight stood without haste, calmly turning to face the onrushing darksider. He paused, momentarily confused by her unhurried actions. She drew her own weapon and locked her gaze with his.

"Your darkness betrays you, Kaox Krul," Crian said.

"And you deny the darkness within you, Jedi," Kaox retorted "Reject your Jedi oath and follow me to Lord Kaan's side."

"That will never happen."

"So you believe."

Two lightsabers flared to life. In the distance, thunder rumbled out of the clouds.

The storm was all around them, despite the clear sky above. Lightning flashed over the trees. *So much for a good omen*, Crian thought.

With the next clap of thunder, Kaox Krul roared. Crian Maru met his charge, lightsaber to lightsaber, dark side to light.

* * *

Dree Vandap watched the battle between Jedi Knight and Sith warrior erupt, horrified and fascinated. Their energy blades carved intricate patterns in the night, punctuated by frequent sparks as the blades collided, drew apart, and collided again.

The Padawan allowed the Force to fill her, calling upon a battle-enhancement technique. She ignited her lightsaber, drawing comfort from the familiar *snap-hiss-hum* of the weapon. Then she charged across the open field, rushing toward the lakeshore to aid her Master.

* * *

The Marauder and the Jedi danced to a life-or-death song only they could hear. It was a dance of violence that reverberated in the Force. The two combatants took each other's measure with the first series of strikes and counterstrikes. One gave ground, then took it back as they sliced and parried. More thunder, and then the wind picked up, swirling fallen leaves around them as they fought. For the Sith and the Jedi, time seemed to ebb and flow, each moment a complex clash of Force-enhanced attacks and blocks that played out in a kind of slow motion.

The Sith warrior launched a deadly barrage of strikes at the Jedi. Crian pulled deeply from the Force and countered each one. She flipped and somersaulted, looking for weaknesses in his defenses. He spun and tumbled, probing her own technique for an opening. For a time, neither found one.

The young Rodian leaped into the fray then, striking at Kaox Krul from behind. He countered this attack, but now he bore an enemy on each side. He let his anger build. This gave him strength, allowed the dark side to blossom within him. His lightsaber twirled from one side to the other, blocking a strike from the Jedi here, parrying a swipe from the apprentice there. What he could not do from this position was launch a meaningful attack at either of them. To do so would be to give the other an opportunity.

Kaox Krul switched to a one-handed grip, leaving his left hand free. He balled his free hand into a fist, squeezing tight and imagining all of his anger slipping down his arm to pool there. He imagined it was a tightly wound spring. Then, when the Jedi's weapon bounced away from his parry, turning her slightly to one side, he opened his hand and unleashed the power that was concentrated therein. The Force spread out like a wave, striking the Jedi and knocking her backward, into the lake.

He called the Force to him again, let it surround him, and then he leaped. He was gone before the apprentice's weapon had barely begun its arc. By the time the energy blade passed through the place he had been, he landed softly behind her. His blood surged with triumph. The apprentice was off balance, just barely, but it was enough. He lashed out, the burning blade of his own weapon skewering the young Radian.

Crian Maru gathered the Force around her and used it to lift her out of the water. She floated to the shore just as the Force turned dark and cold around her. Dree Vandap was dead. Stunned, she watched as her apprentice slumped to the ground. Sorrow flooded her, and she couldn't hold back its flow. Anger rode in on these waves, as did a hatred the likes of which she could not remember ever experiencing. She had failed her student.

Dree was dead.

The Marauder had to die, too.

Crian saw Kaox Krul smile as she charged toward him. She knew she should control her emotions. She was on dangerous ground. *But Dree wasn't supposed to die!* Crian wanted to hurt the Marauder. She wanted to make him pay.

Lightsaber blades collided once more.

* * *

Hours later, the Marauder and the Jedi were still locked in battle. They were too evenly matched for either to gain more than a temporary advantage. They hurled rocks and sticks on tendrils of Force. They sliced and slashed and hacked with lightsabers that hummed angrily at the continued exertion. They taunted each other when they could spare a breath. Punches, kicks, knees, and elbows, they pounded on each other with every weapon at their disposal.

Battered and bruised, covered in cuts and scratches, they both looked ready to drop. Even Kaox's dark armor had fallen apart in places. Whenever Crian felt her muscles weaken, she remembered her beloved student and found the strength to carry on. Where Kaox found such stamina, she had no clue.

The bloated clouds had returned, gathering into a singularly fearsome presence. Jagged streaks of lightning exploded from within as thunder crashed down with a terrible intensity. With every strike and parry, thunder peeled. With every punch and kick, lightning spread across the sky like fiery spider webs.

Crian was beginning to lose ground. She was faster than the Marauder, better trained, but he was stronger and called on reserves of the Force that were forbidden to her. He was going to kill her. He was going to win.

She knew where Kaox drew his power. The dark side of the Force. He wasn't afraid to let his emotions magnify his strength. He had no compunctions about using his anger and hatred as vessels to hold more power than his body or spirit could muster by themselves. He was a Sith warrior, trained to harness the intensity of his darker feelings. Crian parried another strike, then leaped out of the Marauder's reach. For a moment he didn't follow. He just stared after her, illuminated by the red glow of his lightsaber and the strobing bolts of lightning.

"I'm sorry, Dree," Crian said, letting the tears run down her sweat-stained cheeks.

Crian gave into her rage then, unleashing her hatred of the man who stood across from her. She let it sing inside her, a melody of unbridled fury that renewed her strength and determination. The clearing around the lake filled with the emanations of the dark side of the Force.

Kaox roared, giving himself completely to the dark side.

Crian returned the call, embracing her anger and hatred. The bloated clouds splattered the ground and the lake with huge drops of greasy rain. In the downpour, Crian and Kaox each called upon the dark side. Invigorated by its power, they launched themselves, one at the other, and their struggle became even more devastating.

Thunder boomed around the two opponents with each punch and kick and lightsaber clash. Lightning danced over the surface of the lake and lanced into the ground around the warriors. Crian slashed, her anger amplifying the force of her attack. Kaox dodged, whirled, and returned with a deft counterstroke. Lightsaber blades cracked and sparkled, bouncing off each other again and again, and still black rain fell from the sky.

The Marauder, hoping to find a moment's respite, wrapped himself in the Force and hovered over the center of the lake. Crian refused to give Kaox even a moment's respite and followed him into the air.

"Your anger is impressive," Kaox called over the howl of the storm. "Join our Brotherhood of Darkness and renounce the life you have already given up."

"You don't understand, do you?" Crian called back, hurling her anger at him through the Force, thrusting him down toward the churning water below.

He shrugged off the attack and fortified himself with the power of the dark side. Crian did the same.

"Time to die, Jedi," Kaox roared.

Sith and Jedi flew at each other, converging above the roiling cauldron of water. Kaox's lightsaber aimed high. Crian's blade thrust low. A lightning panorama bathed them in harsh light for an instant as each was felled by the other's killing blow.

Then they were gone, lost behind torrential sheets of rain.

* * *

Salen Toth, a Jedi Knight, stood on the shore of a stagnant lake. It was more swamp than lake, actually. The trees around it were twisted and black, with barren branches that reached like skeletal limbs toward the dark, muddy center. The whole place felt ill, deformed. Haunted.

"I found the Padawan," Salen said, speaking into his comlink. "She was killed by a single lightsaber strike. I haven't found any sign of Crian Maru or the Marauder, but I'm sure there was a battle here."

He looked out over the bleak lake, trying to make sense of what happened. All he found in the Force, though, was darkness and despair.

"I'm done here," he said, switching off the comlink.

This was a dead place. It was time for him to return to the living. He turned, lifted the body of the Padawan, and started back for his ship.

Behind him, the dank wind whistled through the twisted trees, and the shadows grew deeper. For a moment, he thought he heard the hum of lightsabers. He turned back, but there was nothing to see.